

# Internships: Learning Beyond the Classroom

by Pedro E. Segarra

“Access” and “Opportunity” – these are two very distinct and very important words that can be the difference between our youth making a right decision or going down the wrong path in life. Almost six years ago, the communications division of the mayor’s office here in the city of Hartford developed an internship program that mentors college and high school students, and helps them achieve personal and professional growth and goals. This is incredibly valuable for a city like Hartford, Conn., where 42 percent of the population and 53 percent of Hartford Public School students are Latino.

That’s a lot of lives that can potentially be touched or even changed for the better. As a Latino, and as someone who came from very humble beginnings, this is a program that caught more than my attention – it has a place in my heart.

I am an attorney by trade with a background in social work, clinical psychology and community organization. When I ascended from city council president to become mayor just a few months ago, I got to experience firsthand the uniqueness and the wealth of talent of these high school and college students – mostly all Hartford residents – who come through this program. They assisted with everything – from writing citations and proclamations to creating new programming for our Government Cable Access Television Channel; from updating our award-winning Web site to accomplishing day-to-day office work. All of their efforts helped make possible a seamless transition from one administration to another without skipping a beat.

I’m so impressed with this because I did not have any high school internships, I needed to work to help financially support my family. I would have loved to have had this kind of opportunity if it would have provided a stipend or pay while I earned credits. There were many organizations that were doing great work when I was growing up, and I would have liked to have capitalized on a chance to work, for example, with ASPIRA.

I guess you could say that I made up for this void in college because I obtained several internships that opened my eyes, my mind, my heart and the doors to a plethora of opportunities. One of my internships was campaigning for then-Congressman Christopher Dodd, which I did in conjunction with a college course on political campaigns and elections. I also obtained a court internship in which I learned the important aspects of criminal prosecution and the role of courts. I remember specifically writing a paper on the injustices of the bail system and the need for reform.

I interned with the secretary of state’s office, within the elections divi-



Pedro E. Segarra is Hartford, Conn.’s second Latino mayor, sworn into office on June 25, 2010. In these extraordinarily difficult financial times, he is working tirelessly to look at all options and generate new ideas to take Hartford to new heights. With an emphasis on creating jobs, pursuing academic excellence in our schools, promoting economic development with a focus on small business, and reducing crime by providing positive alternatives for our youth while also taking an aggressive approach to law enforcement, Segarra’s priorities are inclusiveness and inspiration so that more people are encouraged to participate in their community and in their government.

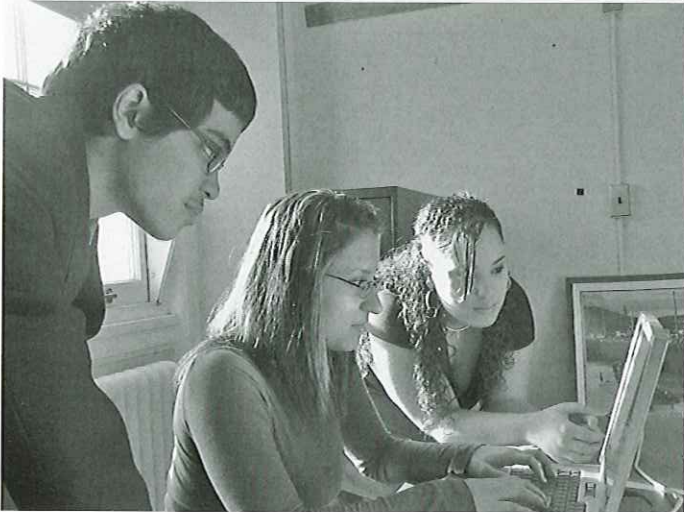
Segarra was born on April 28, 1959. When he was 7, his family moved from the small rural town of Maricao, Puerto Rico, to the Bronx, N.Y., in search of a better life. Segarra is one of six children and was raised by his mother under conditions of extreme poverty. When he was 15, he fled the threat of gangs and arrived in Hartford.

After graduating from what was then called the Greater Hartford Community College (now Capital Community College), Segarra earned a full scholarship to the University of Hartford, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science. He was then admitted to the University of Connecticut Graduate School of Social Work, where he received his master’s degree in social work. He graduated from UConn Law School and is currently admitted to the Connecticut state and federal bars and the Bar of the State of Florida.

Segarra is uniquely qualified to be mayor through his legal, community and government experience. In 1991, he was appointed corporation counsel for the city of Hartford. He was appointed to City Council in 2006, elected in his own right in 2007, and became council president in January of 2010. Until ascending to the mayor’s office, he was the managing partner of his own law firm.

For more information on Hartford’s internship program, please log on to the city’s award-winning Web site at [www.hartford.gov](http://www.hartford.gov).





Xavier Medina, Marisabel Santiago and Glorialys Rodríguez research their assignment on the computer during their internship last spring with the Mayor's Office in Hartford, Conn.

sion and the corporations division. While earning my graduate degree at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, my internship experience was with the Connecticut Regional Education Council's "Birth to Three Program," where I was exposed to early childhood developmental evaluations.

I also worked with the New York governor's office and a community-based organization so that I could research policy issues of the Latino prison population and their educational needs within the system. While at the University of Connecticut Law School, my internship opportunity was with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

These experiences helped me define my lifetime career choices, helped build my résumé, and introduced me to people like Juan Figueroa, who would go on to become the first Latino candidate for governor. These were experiences and exposures I could not have obtained by simply sitting in the classroom. That's why I so passionately write about the internship opportunity that we have here through the city of Hartford and encourage other cities, businesses and nonprofits to explore this kind of community outreach – because it is such a win-win experience.

Many of my mentors were my professors and other professionals who provided me with this "hands-on" and "life" experience. I'm happy to be able to continue to work with many of them and, even more importantly, be friends with them to this day. "Back in the day," I was consistently reminded that the only way I could ever say "thank you" for helping me absorb so much knowledge and wisdom was to "pass it on" and to give someone else the same chance to grow and succeed. Well, I'm proud to say that I've been saying "thank you" ever since. I have made it a personal mission throughout my professional career to take on and mentor young talent. And that mission didn't stop when I became mayor this past June.

One of the core values of my administration is education. For three years now, Hartford has exceeded academic expectations, improved test scores and is closing the achievement gap in school performance between wealthy and poor school districts. It is so important to me that we continue this momentum that I appointed an educator to be my chief of staff.

Hartford is one of America's original cities, but today we are one of the poorest in the nation. Good schools – including positive learning

environments, inspirational teachers and engaged parents – are a proven way to get people out of poverty. As shared in my personal story, I am living proof that education equals opportunity, and that is why I so vehemently want to continue and even expand Hartford's current internship program.

While the summer interns are paid, thanks to working in conjunction with the Hartford Office for Youth Services, Capital Workforce Partners, the Connecticut Puerto Rican Forum, and the Urban League of Greater Hartford, our interns can always simply volunteer or receive course credit, especially on the college level. We have attracted students from Columbia University, Trinity College, the University of Connecticut, the University of Hartford, and Westfield State College, to name a few. Our high school students are from the Law and Government Academy at Hartford Public High School.

In fact, the internship program has flourished so much and garnered so much attention, it's to the point that cities like Baltimore have inquired about it and are looking to use it as a model for their program. However, success is not based on best practices alone, it is based on people – young, eager and talented individuals who are hungry for knowledge and a chance to learn new skills and then show them off. This internship is that kind of unprecedented opportunity that does not come knocking very often.

For example, students from the Law and Government Academy at Hartford Public High School are taking full advantage of this opportunity. They understand that the pioneers of this program graduated high school, and many won full and partial scholarships and are currently attending college. The media research, the photography, the news conferences, the television productions, including our most recent anti-graffiti public service announcements – all of these assignments and experiences pay off and help pave the way for future careers. Some of our biggest success stories include our "graduates" going on to become published authors and working with the Obama presidential campaign.

This real-life work experience will help open doors for more young people in the future. But opportunity is an investment, and investments cost money, and in these difficult economic times, state dollars are getting harder and harder to come by. I am determined to give 100 percent of my effort for every dollar of taxpayer money spent on our students. With a significant portion of Connecticut's future work force coming from urban areas like Hartford, we need to make sure our young people are prepared to seize the opportunity of today for the jobs of tomorrow.



*Coming January 24th Issue*

**Financing a College Education**

**Ad Deadline: Jan. 5**

**Please call our sales staff for more info:**

**1-800-549-8280**

**ext. 102 or 106**